

Serious Problems in Sonia Ryang's *Reading North Korea*: A Critical Review Article

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Abstract: Sonia Ryang's *Reading North Korea* is a recent work that attempts a non-factual and non-empirical ethnology of North Korea, without field research. Ryang selects fifteen state-controlled literary and film narratives from 1952 to 1983, claims to extract "field data" from them, and draws speculative conclusions about "everyday life" in North Korea in the 2000s. Untrained in literary criticism and theory, Ryang confuses literary terms, assumes a false identity of reality and fiction, resorts to ahistorical apriorism and sociological reductionism, and makes excessive use of story summary and long-quotation.

Keywords: *anthropology, apriorism, ethnology, literary studies, North Korea, sociological criticism*

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Disclaimer: *This review article is written in a direct critical-analytical style, and all the observations made are intended dispassionately, in the manner of the descriptive sciences. Since the style simultaneously strives to be straight, concise, and concrete, rhetorical approaches that may curve, lengthen, and soften the writing have been avoided. Perhaps the consequence is an extremely rational style; but it is never intended as a cruel or condescending style. The article is written in an entirely constructive spirit, for serious researchers, and in the long-term interests of North Korean literary studies in English.*

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Sonia Ryang's *Reading North Korea* is a work with many problems. Self-described as "interpretive [...] rather than factual or empirical," the book makes the naive and impressionistic claims that North Korea is an "unknown land"; that "extra-textual information" about "everyday life" in the society is obtainable from a state-controlled literature that "is not always produced [...] as a reflection of social reality and as a constitutive part of that reality"; that the state is comparable to World War II-era "Japanese army 'comfort stations'" (i.e., sex slavery camps); and that "our capability to humanize North Korean society [...] is not clear to me" (pp. 4, 12, 13, 137–8, 139, 210).

With such statements, one would think Ryang is a newcomer to North Korea. She is not. An ethnic North Korean from Japan who visited North Korea three times in 1981 to 1985 with the Ch'ongryŏn organization (a de facto North Korean mission in Japan), she is a United States-based, British-educated social anthropologist, specializing on the Korean Diaspora.¹ She has two decades worth of publications on the subjects of Korean colonialism, Korean nationalism, ethnic North Koreans in Japan, and speculative anthropology. Ryang, to be sure, has written on North Korea, but her publications in this area are fractional, bespeaking that North Korean studies is incidental to her other work.

Ryang's extensive curriculum vitae at the University of Iowa Department of Anthropology website reveals that, from 1990 to 2011, she published only six articles on North Korea: "Critical Synthesis on North Korea as Embodied Ideology" (1992), "Gender in Oblivion: Women in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea" (2000), "North Korea" (2001), "Technologies of the Self: Reading North Korean Novels from the 1980s" (2002), "Biopolitics, or, the Logic of Sovereign Love: Love's Whereabouts in North Korea" (2009), and "North Korea: Beyond Security Discourse" (2009).² Much else aside from this is about ethnic Koreans in Japan who claim North Korean identity.

By the academic record, Ryang is not a North Korean studies specialist. She is a scholar of the Korean Diaspora with a side interest in North Korea. Nonetheless, she

designs herself “an ethnologist of North Korea” in *Reading North Korea* (p. 3). What is Ryang’s aim in this book? Characterizing all preceding scholarship as mostly “advocacy, accusation, or ridicule,” she says she wants to “neither advocate for nor demonize North Korea,” but to disclose the “cultural logic” of the country, to “lay bare the logical undercurrents of the culture” (pp. 3, 4, 210). Ryang never explains what she means by “cultural logic” or “logical undercurrents of the culture,” yet one can surmise a definition.

Considering that *logic* is the philosophical science of the regulative structures of human thinking and reasoning, and that *culture* is the sum total of behaviors, ideas, and tools in human history, a *cultural logic*, addressing *logical undercurrents of culture*, would be an anthropological-philosophical study of tendencies of thought and reason that direct or cause those human-made phenomena that are social, ideational, and material. Presumably, a cultural logician would be someone with rigorous training in anthropology *and* logic, knowing about various logics (e.g., dialectical, intensional, modal, paradoxical, predicate, propositional), deduction, induction, rhetorical fallacies, and validity claims.

Unfortunately, Ryang has no documented background in logical studies, and it becomes clear that she is *not* doing cultural logic, but something toward a sociological literary criticism. Notwithstanding that Ryang is untrained in the concepts, methods, and terms of social literary analysis, she chooses fifteen North Korean works from 1952 to 1983—9 short stories, 2 novels, 2 novelettes, 1 film script, 1 film series (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2)—declaring, “I treat literary texts as sources of [field] data,” and “this book is not about literature or textuality per se” (p. 13). Contradicting her remark that the state-censored texts are non-reflective and non-realistic, she takes them as *mimetic registers of social life*.

Publication Period	Number of Works	Genre Classification
1952	1	Short story (1)
1961	1	Short story (1)
1966	1	Short story (1)
1970	2	Short story (2)

1974	2	Short story (1), Novel (1)
1976	1	Short story (1)
1978–1981	1	Film series (1)
1981	1	Film script (1)
1982	2	Novelette (2)
1983	3	Short story (2), Novel (1)

Fig. 1. Period, number, and genre of narrative works addressed in *Reading North Korea*.

How does Ryang attempt to extract “field data” from this material? She uses a so-called “hybrid” method that combines “closely and critically examining” (what is called *formalism* in literary studies) with *a priori*, readymade ideas from the speculative post-Nietzschean philosophers Giorgio Agamben, Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, Simone Weil, and Slavoj Žižek (pp. 3, 13). Simultaneously, she jumbles up established literary terms, defining *all media and communication* as “literature”; using “medium” instead of *genre*; collapsing the genre terms *novel*, *novella*, and *short story*; and calling the *film script* genre a “novel for the sake of simplicity” (pp. 11, 44, 45, 48, 91, 94, 108, 127, 144).³

Author	Title and Genre	Chapter
Choe, Hag-su	“A Big Heart” (<i>K’ŭn shimjang</i> , 1970); short story (<i>tanp’yŏn sosŏl</i> ; short-piece fiction)	1
Choe, Sang-sun	“Our School” (<i>Uri hakkyo</i> , 1974); short story	1
Chŏng, Chang-yun	<i>The Long Road</i> (<i>Mŏn kil</i> , 1983); novel (<i>changp’yŏn sosŏl</i> ; long-piece fiction)	1
Kim, Dong-ho	“Sunshine Forever” (<i>Haetbich ’ŭn kkŭdŏpshi</i> , 1983); short story	1
Kim, Sam-bok	<i>A Spring Growth</i> (<i>Sŏngjang-ŭi pom</i> , 1982); novelette (<i>chungp’yŏn sosŏl</i> ; medium-piece fiction)	3

Kim, Sam-bok	“The Legend of Miru Plain” (<i>Miru pŏl chŏnsŏl</i> , 1983); short story	1
Ko, Byŏng-sam	“Pure Morning” (<i>Malgŭn ach'im</i> , 1970); short story	1
Ko, Byŏng-sam	“Pyongyang Is Singing” (<i>Pyŏngyang-ŭn norae handa</i> , 1976); short story	1
Li, Chin-u	<i>Unsung Heroes</i> (<i>Irŭm ŏbtŭn yŏngungdŭl</i> , 1981, 2 vols.); film script (<i>yŏnghwa munhak</i> ; film literature)	2
Li, Chong-ryŏl	“Burning Night” (<i>Pul t'anŭn pam</i> , 1961); short story	2
Li, T'aek-jin	<i>The Iron Workers</i> (<i>Yonghaegongdŭl</i> , 1982); novelette	3
Paek, Hyŏn-u	“The Stars Are Flowing” (<i>Pyŏldŭri hŭrŭnda</i> , 1966); short story	2
Yu, Ho-son, dir.	<i>Unsung Heroes</i> (<i>Irŭm ŏbtŭn yŏngungdŭl</i> , 1978–1981, 20 parts); film series (<i>yesul yŏnghwa</i> ; art film)	2
Yun, Se-jung	“An Old Soldier and a Young Soldier” (<i>Ku taewon wa shin taewon</i> , 1952); short story	2
Yun, Se-jung	<i>The Steel Furnace Is Breathing</i> (<i>Yonggwangno nŭn sum shwinda</i> , 1974); novel	1

Fig. 2. Narrative selections in *Reading North Korea*. Title translations are Ryang's.

Compounding the apriorism and confusion are other serious problems: (1) Ryang never explains her fiction selection criteria and why she over-represents certain authors and one genre; (2) she translates but uses Korean titles in transliteration, which goes against standard practice and is insensitive to non-Korean readers; and (3) the bulk of her book is summary and long-quotation of fictional works, some quotes covering one and a half to two pages. Case in point, the book is divided into three chapters averaging at 50 pages each, and the third chapter consists of 25 pages straight of summary and quotation. Academic style manuals would fault that as unoriginal/unskillful and lazy/timid writing.⁴

Any scholar should know that the excess of summary and quotation in *Reading*

North Korea is academically inappropriate. Moreover, it lays potential ground for legal charges of copyright infringement, as North Korean publications are domestically copyrighted and as international copyright has protected North Korean literature since 2003.⁵ Ryang and Harvard, though, are apparently protected by United States law, which regards North Korean works published prior to membership in the “Berne Convention or the World Trade Organization, whichever is earlier,” as being “in the public domain.”⁶ Ryang’s cited sources were published in 1970, 1974, 1976, 1981, 1982, and 1983.⁷

That said, Ryang claims to write an ethnology “without conducting fieldwork,” yet she notes that “without recourse to *other studies and forms of documentation*, no ethnological fieldwork can be successful” (pp. 9, 11; emphasis added). Here, one would assume that in her apparent inability to do independent research in national-Stalinist North Korea, Ryang’s turn to state-controlled, approved narratives would compel her to consult the massive corpus of available South Korean scholarship or the smaller, but useful, body of North Korean literary/film studies in English from 1977 to 2011.⁸ Aside from Steven Chung, Ryang *does not cite any* of the South Korean or Western scholarship.⁹

As a result of neglecting “other studies” on North Korean literature (e.g., J. A. Cho, Y. H. Choi, A. David-West, S. Epstein, H. I. Fenkl, T. Gabroussenko, D. Hart, H. Y. Jung, I. Kim, Y. M. Kwon, D. B. Lee, H. S. Lim, B. Myers, M. R. Pihl, V. Pucek, J. J. Suh, Y. H. Suh, A. Tennant, and D. Zur) and North Korean film (e.g., C. K. Armstrong, A. Dukalsis and Z. Hooker, J. Gorenfeld, K. H. Kim, S. Y. Kim, H. J. Lee, S. H. Lim, C. Medlicott, M. J. Park, J. Schönherr, and M. Takashi), which would greatly inform her inquiry and show her how to do sociological criticism, Ryang ends up making all sorts of elisions, errors, misinterpretations, naive inductions, and wheel reinventings in *Reading North Korea*.

With the exception of a few academics, most of the scholarship on North Korean literature and film has been sociologically oriented, exploring North Korean art media as agencies of ideology, policy, politics, and social control under the bureaucratic Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK). Ryang asks, “[H]ow should we view the role of literature in North Korea?” (p. 205). She answers that it is an “allegorical” medium that “educate[s] the

masses” in “certain political values,” a practical “tool” serving “to maintain proper political conduct” (pp. 205, 207). Having made the original discovery, Ryang advances, “[W]e need a new tool to analyze the social role of literature” in North Korea (p. 207).

What are Ryang's non-factual, non-empirical interpretations? In chapter one, she says late leader “Kim Il Sung knows no age” in 1970s and 1980s North Korean literature (odd since childhood stories about the leader appear in that era); that he is “just like the gods of Greek mythology” (an error; Kim is cast as a secular postcolonial heroic-legend figure); that he is an all-loving “Father/Mother” (*ōbōi* means *parent*), a “hermaphrodite of love” and “beyond” sexuality (actually, he is a patriarch); and that “in North Korea” [...] a person's demonstration of love for the Great Leader is a most important condition for another to love that person” (that is, in North Korean *literature*) (pp. 50, 80–81, 84).

As for chapter two, it is built up on two propositions: “a state of emergency [is] a normal state of existence” in North Korea, and “war [is] at the heart of the daily lives of North Koreans” (pp. 85, 86). Repeating some narratives, Ryang finally tells the reader North Korea is an “emergency nation” in which “entertainment” is “built around themes of war, hatred, and contempt for American imperialism” (p. 138). And “in the stories [...] the framework of war and the framework of the emergency ultimately have an influence on all [pleasure, pain, achievement, disillusionment, suffering, hope, distress, pride, rage, success] of everyday life” (p. 139). They are old, sweeping, totalizing claims.

By chapter three, Ryang wants to “understand and interpret” the “movement of the self in North Korean literature” (p. 140; emphasis added). Next, she proposes that “in North Korea,” the “self” must “be killed through sacrifice for the Great Leader” by personal “choice” per the theme of “purification, correction, and transformation” (pp. 140, 141). Her appraisal: “the way North Korean selves exist in relation to the Great Leader [...] *eternally* locks them in a *perpetual* cycle of self-examination,” which “directly enables North Korea to continue to exist today,” for “a highly sophisticated principle governs selves in North Korea” (pp. 187, 188; emphasis added). This is metaphysical.¹⁰

After the fictional engagement from 1952 to 1983, Ryang states in her conclusion,

“*In North Korea today*, the domestic is political and the private is public. We have seen in the preceding chapters that political concerns fully penetrate family life and romantic relations” (p. 204; emphasis added). It is a considerable logical leap, since the three chapters deal with *officially vetted imaginary story-worlds* created *twenty-nine to sixty years ago*, not the real North Korea of the past or “North Korea today” in 2009 to 2012, when Ryang was writing and finally published her book.¹¹ Regrettably, social reality (economics, history, politics, society) does not factor for much in *Reading North Korea*.

That is most clearly seen in her comments on *Unsung Heroes*. She claims the film series/script “humanizes and exoticizes the [American and South Korean] enemy” as “concrete characters” (p. 107); this is “the most cosmopolitan and international of North Korean novels or films produced to this day,” with cultural, emotional, ethnical, geographical, national, musical, and political diversity (pp. 108–109); however, the spy story is “highly improbable” (p. 128). Counter to the naiveté, film scholar Hyangjin Lee says *Unsung Heroes* contains “strong jingoism” for party “indoctrination” and serves to “divert the people’s attention” from pervasive economic and political dissatisfaction.¹²

Ryang never addresses (1) the Soviet Army-initiated assimilation of Zhdanovism from 1945 to 1950; (2) the 1946 adoption of *socialist realism* and its 1970s variant *Juche* realism; (3) the Korean Writers’ Union in relation to the WPK congresses of 1946, 1948, 1956, 1961, 1970, and 1980; (4) the party purges of 1956 to 1960 (during Soviet “de-Stalinization”) and 1966 to 1968 (during Mao’s Cultural Revolution); (5) the post-Korean War struggle against resurgent illiteracy and lagging “socialist patriotism” in the masses; and (6) officially documented cases of boredom, indifference, and resistance to party-state ideology and approved literature among North Korean men, women, and children.¹³

Contrary to sociological reductionism, it must be stressed that *literary and film narratives are not reality*. As with all artistic creation, they are “a deflection, a changing and transformation of reality, in accordance with the peculiar laws of art,” and “time and space in a novel are not those of real life.”¹⁴ While these principles apply to all fictional

work, there is an added complication in North Korean literature, namely, tendentious configuration of life to party-state ideology and its tactical manifestations at the given moment. North Korean fiction is a politically subordinate structure of ideas, images, and symbols, whose relation to anthropology and sociology is not simply correspondent.

Altogether, Sonia Ryang's *Reading North Korea* has little value as anthropology or criticism. Ryang said this was an "interpretative" work, not "factual or empirical." Unfortunately, any interpretation divested of the factual and empirical in nature, society, and history turns into pure speculation and pure ideology. North Korea, in the end, really is an "unknown land" for Ryang in *Reading North Korea*. She confounds the *official imaginary* with social reality, *figural simulacra* with living people, and the *artificial, ideal, teleological story-world* with the actual, material, non-teleological external world, demonstrating what the literary specialists and logicians call the category error.¹⁵

Notes

¹ Sonia Ryang, "Technologies of the Self: Reading North Korean Novels from the 1980s," *Acta Koreana*, Vol. 5, No. 1, January 2002, pp. 21–32, p. 22. Ryang provides a short autobiography in *North Koreans in Japan*, where she says, "I do identify myself as one of the Chongryun Koreans [.]". See *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology, and Identity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), p. 1, *Questia*, <http://www.questia.com/read/98917130> (accessed December 26, 2012).

² See Sonia Ryang, "Sonia Ryang Curriculum Vitae," *Department of Anthropology, University of Iowa*, 2012, <http://www.uiowa.edu/~anthro/documents/webCV.pdf> (accessed December 26, 2012).

³ Ryang's misuse of the genre-specific term "novel" is a problem of *contrastive rhetoric*, of first-language interference in second-language use. In Korean, the short story is called *tanp'yŏn sosŏl* (short-piece fiction); the novelette and novella are both *chungp'yŏn sosŏl* (medium-piece fiction); and the novel is *changp'yŏn sosŏl* (long-piece fiction). Commonly, the four genres are

referred to as *sosŏl* (fiction). Confusion occurs in that *sosŏl* is also understood in Korean as “novel” and translated accordingly into English. This problem was first encountered by the reviewer when he taught a short story course in English at a university in Seoul, South Korea, in Fall 2008. Despite correction, several students persisted in using the term “novel.” Colin Bulman offers a non-theoretical way to distinguish the genres: flash fiction (less than 1,000 words), short story (1,000 to 7,000 words), novelette (7,000 to 25,000 words), novella (25,000 to 40,000 words), and novel (50,000 to 200,000 words); there are critics who regard works in the less than 1,000-word to the less than 20,000-word range as short stories. Some novelettes have been classified as short stories (*tanp’yŏn sosŏl*) in North Korea. Colin Bulman, *Creative Writing: A Guide and Glossary to Fiction Writing* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007), pp. 148, 151, 205, 206. On the genre characteristics of the novel, see M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Carly Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004); Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971); Rachel Schmidt, *Forms of Modernity: Don Quixote and Modern Theories of the Novel* (Toronto, CA: University of Toronto Press, 2011); and Ian P. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

⁴ Thayne K. Anderson and Kent Forrester, *Reading, then Writing: From Source to Essay* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), p. 38; Joseph Gibaldi, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 2003), p. 92; and Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 7th ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 73.

⁵ See “Contracting Parties: Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” *World Intellectual Property Organization*, 2002, http://www.wipo.int/treaties/en/ShowResults.jsp?search_what=C&country_id=94C (accessed December 26, 2012).

⁶ See “DPRK Joins International Copyright Protection Treaty,” *People’s Korea*, 2003, http://www1.korea-np.co.jp/pk/192nd_issue/2003053106.htm (accessed December 26, 2012). See also the sections “Works Published Abroad Before 1978” and “Special Cases” in “Copyright Term and the Public Domain in the United States,” *Copyright Information Center, Cornell University*, 1 January 2012, <http://copyright.cornell.edu/resources/publicdomain.cfm> (accessed December 26, 2012).

⁷ Ryang seems to be unaware that re-editions of pre-1970s North Korean narratives are occasionally politically corrupted as per the Kim Il Sung personality cult.

⁸ On national-Stalinism, see Ivan T. Berend, *Central and Eastern Europe, 1944–1993: Detour from the Periphery to the Periphery* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 95, 129, 174; Cheng Chen and Ji-Yong Lee, “Making Sense of North Korea: ‘National Stalinism’ in Comparative-Historical Perspective,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 4, 2007, pp. 459–475; and Vladimir Tismaneanu, “Understanding National Stalinism: Legacies of Ceausescu’s Socialism,” *Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 18–36.

⁹ South Korean scholarship on North Korean narratives has been prolific since late President Kim Dae Jung’s 1998 “Sunshine Policy” of rapprochement with Pyongyang and the historic June 2000 inter-Korean summit meeting. One can find *contextual* criticism investigating biography, emotion, gender, history, ideology, politics, and society, as well as *formal* criticism on genre forms, genre classification, and images. See, for example, Hyŏn-shik Ch’ŏn, “‘*P’ibada shik hyŏngmyŏng kagŭk*’ kwa kamjŏng hunryŏn: ‘Chipdanjuŭi’ wa ‘chido wa daejung’ ŭl chungshimŭro [‘*Sea of Blood*-Style Revolutionary Opera’ and Emotion Training: On ‘Collectivism’ and ‘Leadership and Masses’], *Hyŏndae Pukhan yŏngu* [Contemporary North Korean Studies], Vol. 13, No. 3, 2010, pp. 201–240, *DBpia*, <http://www.dbpia.co.kr/Journal/ArticleDetail/1665625> (accessed December 26, 2012); Ch’ang-ŭn O, “Pukhan munhak-ŭi chongryu wa hyŏngt’ae, kallae-e kwanhan koch’al” [An Inquiry Concerning the Genres, Forms, and Branches of North Korean Literature], *Ōmun ronjip*

[Language and Literature Journal], Vol. 42, 2009, pp. 325–347, *DBpia*, <http://www.dbpia.co.kr/Journal/ArticleDetail/1129901> (accessed December 26, 2012); Tŏg-gyu Pak and Mi-jin Kim, “Pukhan yŏnguk eso-ŭi suryŏng hyŏngsang mihak yangsang: *Sŭngri-ŭi kich'i ttara-rŭl chungshimŭro*” [Aspects of Great Leader Image Aesthetics in North Korean Theater: On *Follow the Banner of Victory*], *Hangukŏ munhwa* [Korean Language and Culture], Vol. 45, 2011, pp. 147–167, *DBpia*, <http://www.dbpia.co.kr/Journal/ArticleDetail/1544936> (accessed December 26, 2012); and Im-ha Yu, “Pukhan ch’ogi munhak kwa ‘Soryŏn’ ira nŭn ch’amjo chŏm: Chosŏn munhwa kyuru, Chŭdanobichŭm, pŏnyŏk dwoen naengjŏn nonri” [Early North Korean Literature and the ‘Soviet Union’ as a Reference Point: North Korea-Soviet Culture Exchange, Zhdanovism, Translated Cold War Logic], *Hangukŏ munhak yŏngu* [Korean Language and Literature Studies], Vol. 57, 2011, pp. 153–184, *DBpia*, <http://www.dbpia.co.kr/Journal/ArticleDetail/1543301> (accessed December 26, 2012).

¹⁰ The term “metaphysical” is used in the sense of “abstract, ahistorical, and speculative.”

¹¹ Ryang was “currently writing” *Reading North Korea* in 2009. See Sonia Ryang, “Biopolitics, or, the Logic of Sovereign Love: Love’s Whereabouts in North Korea,” *North Korea: Toward a Better Understanding*, ed. Sonia Ryang (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), pp. 57–83, p. 81n2.

¹² See Hyangjin Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture, Politics* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 43, 44. Lee’s reference to the film series is brief. She translates the title as *Unknown Heroes*, unlike Ryang’s *Unsung Heroes*. The original Korean, *Irŭm ōmnŭn yŏngungdŭl*, literally means “brave men without names.”

¹³ Official documentation may be found in sources such as Kim Il Sung’s and Kim Jong Il’s *Selected Works*.

¹⁴ Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky, ed. William Keach (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2005), p. 147; and René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1984), p. 25.

¹⁵ Basically, the imaginary is the way surroundings are imagined and “carried in images, stories, and legends” (Taylor, p. 23). The imaginary is not “extratextual reality”; the imaginary is not real, but “assumes an appearance of reality” in the fictionalizing act and the experience of the reader (Iser, pp. 3, 14, 18). When posited as a mental image, the imaginary permits “two extremes”: it “may take effect as a negation of reality or as a modification of consciousness” (Ibid, p. 203). Importantly, “the imaginary is manipulated according to prevailing needs” (Ibid, p. 240). All of this must be borne in mind in the study of state-controlled North Korean literary and film narratives. Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); and Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).